

*The following opinion piece by Commissioner Vilaseca was sent to Vermont news media on Thursday, September 3, 2009.*

In the U.S., 30 million people over age 16, or 14 percent of the country's adult population, don't read well enough to understand a newspaper article written at an eighth-grade level or fill out a job application. The U.S. ranks fifth on adult literacy skills when compared to other industrialized nations. It is estimated that the effects of low literacy cost the U.S. \$225 billion or more each year in non-productivity in the workforce, crime, and loss of tax revenue due to unemployment. September 8<sup>th</sup> has been designated as International Literacy Day, giving us an opportunity to reflect on the impact of literacy in our state and society.

Here in Vermont, as of 2003, approximately seven percent (nearly 34,000) of adults ages 16 and over lacked basic literacy skills. That includes a significant immigrant and refugee population for whom English is not their native language. As with every other state, Vermont's adult education and literacy support system is only able to serve a fraction of that population, meaning thousands of Vermonters are without the basic skills needed to participate in a literate world.

The Community High School of Vermont (CHV) serves another significant portion of that population - those in the custody of the Department of Corrections who are under the age of 23 and without a high school diploma. Over 90 percent of Vermont's inmates in CHV were high-school dropouts prior to incarceration.

The Vermont State Board of Education and the Vermont Department of Education have made a commitment to leading the transformation of Vermont's education system, including ensuring that education is focused on the needs of the student. During this past legislative session, the Vermont Legislature established the laudable goal of increasing Vermont's high school graduation rate to 100 percent by the year 2020. One of the vehicles for accomplishing this is the High School Completion Program, administered by Learning Works, Vermont's system for the provision of adult education and literacy services. This program is seen as a model for some of the innovative practices that will inform transformation in our high schools.

Fortunately, we do not rely entirely on those publicly funded systems. Other public and private initiatives contribute to Vermont's effort to address this critical need. But there is still much to be done. We must continue to respond to the needs of those adults who find they lack the basic literacy skills necessary to succeed in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. And we must do everything in our power to reduce the number of Vermonters who reach adulthood without having acquired those basic literacy skills.

We can transform Vermont's education system and we can work hard to see that every Vermont student successfully completes their education. And we will continue to address the literacy needs of adults even as we strive to reduce those needs through the transformation of our preK-12 system. So, as we use International Literacy Day as an occasion to think about the essential role of education throughout the world, we must also acknowledge the importance of lifelong learning here in Vermont. We have the opportunity to invest in the future of Vermont by committing our energy, skill, and financial resources to the elimination of illiteracy in Vermont, an investment that promises rich rewards for all Vermonters.

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